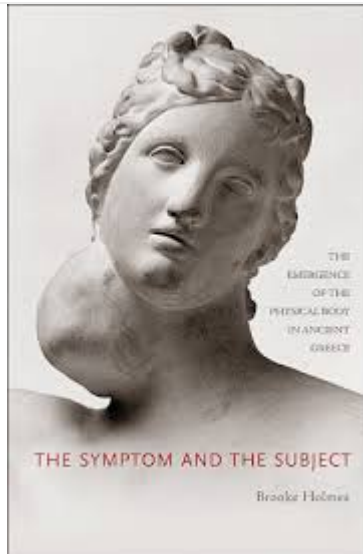


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The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece



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The Symptom and the Subject: The Emergence of the Physical Body in Ancient Greece. By Brooke Holmes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. 2010). Pp. vii + 355. Hardcover, \$45.00.

In *The Symptom and the Subject*, Brooke Holmes attempts to explain the body in ancient Greece and its rise as a subject of physical inquiry. She does so by examining the notion of the ‘symptom,’ its relation to the physical body and its variation of meanings over time from Homer to Euripides. Her study is based on the assumption that the physical body is not a given, particularly in the time period she discusses. And thus, she uses the symptom and its role as first a daemonic sign and later a sign of disease or natural external influences (like air or water) to demonstrate the physical body’s emergence during the classical period. Holmes also argues that through its emergence in the ancient Greek world as an object of investigation, the physical body comes to change how human beings can be imagined and how they can imagine themselves. It encourages a way of thinking about people in physical terms, which has implications both inside and outside of medical discourse (ix). In this book, the symptom, and not the physical body takes center stage. Indeed, Holmes argues that the physical body that existed by the time of Plutarch, designated by the Greek word *soma*, emerged through changes in the interpretation of symptoms during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C.

Chapter one, “Before the Physical Body,” is true to its title. Using Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Holmes tries to make sense of magico-religious ideas about harm caused by the gods by using two perspectives on the person; the “seen” and the “felt” (42). The “seen” is how a person appears to others. The “felt” describes the conscious field that constitutes the unity of the self. While many studies, whether focused on the body or the mind, are forced to deal with the distorting influence of mind/body dualism in the works of Homer, Holmes avoids the minefield by focusing on the unity of the person citing Bruno Snell and Michael Clarke.^[1] Homer’s epics describe a human landscape that is full of suffering, a fact that Holmes takes advantage of as she attempts to describe the human person before the physical body. This suffering takes place at the hands of the gods, who are “infinitely attentive” to human life (45). Everyday symptoms can be attributed to them as well. However, Holmes is careful to point out that this attribution of symptom and suffering to the gods is not an example of the “marionette model”—advanced by Snell and Frankel, attributing sudden emotion, insight, or pain only to the gods, thus indicating the lack of genuine agency in Homer’s heroes. Rather, she describes daemonic interference as “the

abduction of agency” (46). An example of this phenomenon is in the *Odyssey* when Athena makes the suitors laugh with “alien jaws” and in so doing appropriates a part of the self from the proper name altogether. If a person in Homer suggests that a daemonic agent is acting on himself or another person, this does not mean he is primitive and incapable of realizing subjectivity. In this way, Holmes justifies her use of Homer and other poetic sources as evidence for a magico-religious framework for interpreting symptoms that help to constitute the boundaries of a self (47).

Returning to the “seen” and the “felt” Holmes assigns each as a boundary of the self. The “seen” is the structure of the person (skin, flesh, bones) while the “felt” is the cognitive-affective dimension of the person (strengths, emotions, thoughts, breath). This “felt” aspect of the person can be problematic, as has been proven by its study by modern scholars like Clarke, Bolens, and Jahn, among others, who see in varying degrees a self that is made up of organs that operate as locations of psychological function.[2] Holmes deals with this by reminding the reader that human beings were not imagined in Homer’s time as we imagine them now. Apparent references to internal organs do not have to assume an anatomical or physiological reality that matches up with our modern one (63).

In chapter two, Holmes describes the larger conceptual context of the emergence of the physical body. The web of social relationships in Homer’s day is replaced by “a community of objects joined together by their participation” in what she calls physicality (85). She suggests two aspects of physicality that are particularly important to the emergence of the physical body. The first aspect is the transfer of power from unseen social agents to impersonal forces that drive transformation in composite objects. The change begins with sixth century physicists who call into question anthropomorphizing projections onto the gods and suggest theories that create a new understanding of reciprocity between people and the larger world.

The notion of the “seen” returns yet again as Holmes highlights early Greek concerns over the “unseen” which included a domain or cavity within the human body where respiration occurred and embryos took shape. These “unseen” things can also interact with the impersonal forces that have replaced the gods- namely with aspects of nature, like

temperature and moisture (111). Holmes also argues that as physicists came to describe a physical body in which the interior was a space largely beyond the reach of consciousness they split the conscious subject from physical object, embedding the line between seen and unseen inside the human being (116). This in turn leads to the basic dynamics of medical knowledge during the fifth and fourth centuries—splitting the person into the knower who strives to understand and manipulate the body and the body itself (118).

Chapter three explains how the hidden space within the body called the cavity, allows for the incorporation of the daemonic into the physical body. This physical body is a strange land where symptoms act as messengers to physicians. They allow physicians to see inside the body, in the traditionally “unseen” space of the cavity. Thus the symptom sits at the threshold of the seen and unseen. Daemonic or external forces remain in the picture as Holmes points out that there is an interval, represented by the cavity, between what causes the symptom and the emergence of the symptom itself (131). The longer the emergence of a symptom takes, the more potential there is for the cavity to appear daemonic. Holmes also stresses the task of the medical writers, who try to understand elusive disease using two kinds of “imperceptibility”—namely what is potentially seen, and what is seen with the mind. Thus, as physicians developed new techniques for seeing the unseen they not only transformed the meaning of disease but also helped create the physical body as a conceptual object that battled with disease and served as “the mysterious substratum of the person” (147).

Care of the body remains important in chapter four where Holmes argues that medicine during the classical period evolved from trying to understand symptoms and their causes to suggesting ways to prevent symptoms from ever occurring. The cavity remains important here, as the embodied person could then interpret corporeal signs by looking past his own body to see its hidden troubles (179). Using the works of Plato and Xenophon, Holmes argues that thinkers found a renewed interest in the mastery of the self, a self that included symptoms. She uses the example of Socrates urging his followers to take their own notes on the effects of food, drink and exercise on their bodies. He tells his followers that such attention will allow them to discover “better than any doctor” what suits their constitution. Thus physicality of a person

becomes an ethical issue, because a subject that can take care of itself can be praised or blamed for that care (182). Praise and blame can be tricky however, particularly when it comes to gender in the ancient world. Holmes deals with this issue head on, noting that the ambiguous relationship of bodily health to the health of the social, ethical subject both inside and outside medical writing is powerfully illustrated by the gendered body. She notes that the normative expression of female nature can be construed as pathological in terms of a male norm during the classical period. But despite this, female bodies were well equipped for survival and ancient medical writers explained this by suggesting that if a person had a naturally diseased body, that person was better able to take humoral disturbances in stride (186).

Chapter five takes up the question of how the *soma* defined by heat, flesh and the pulse of life, differs from the person who experiences and responds to forces like desire and shame. The chapter provides an interesting insight into how the physical body, emerging over several centuries came to function as a dominant model for the *psuche* as it emerged as the locus of the faculties that constitute ethical subjectivity (195). Holmes also suggests that the need for care of the *psuche* separate from care for the body helped create body-mind dualism.

Chapter six focuses on concerns about the fragility of the person, both body and mind that results from concerns about taking care. She uses three close studies of Euripidean tragedy, *Heracles*, *Orestes* and *Hippolytus*, to argue that tragic representations of disease were colored by the fragility of the physical body. Holmes also suggests that of all the genres examined in her book, tragedy “most thoroughly realizes the potential of the symptom to generate meaning, rather than simply revealing ‘facts’” (229). In fact, both medical writers and Euripides feature an uncertainty about causes for symptoms. They can be daemonic, phlegmatic, related to emotion, knowledge or even the nature of the female body (237). The symptom is a tragic convention that Euripides exploits to engage both a poetic-tragic tradition of representing suffering and medical and ethical ideas about pain, distress, and antinomian desires and acts (239).

Holmes’s most important claim remains muted through most of the book. While she spends a great deal of time explaining the emergence of the physical body, notions about its care, and its ethical becoming, the

real story here is a response to scholarly attempts to find origins for body/soul dualism in the West. Holmes suggests that most scholarly accounts have focused on the soul because of Timaeus's claim that the soul came before the body. In Plato's *Timaeus*, the narrator describes how the world was created, suggesting at first that the *soma* was created before the *psuche*. He claims confusion derived from the fact that humans are subject to chance, and insists that "naturally, the divine demiurge did not make the *soma* before the [*psuche*], the ruled before the ruler" (275). Thus Holmes focuses on the physical body, noting that an "erring Timaeus" may have been closer to the truth than he believed. Her overarching argument, that the "seen" and ethical physical body came to shape notions about the soul, and not the other way around, is striking. What is also notable is Holmes's use of the "seen" and the "felt" to deal with the anthropological anachronism that many scholars face when dealing with ancient writers. It is quite effective as the seen provides a way to encompass an external person that can be perceived by the individual and others around him. The felt allows us to describe the internal workings of a person, a subject that is not easily apprehended by modern scholars studying ancient texts. Holmes's insistence that the physical body was not completely realized until it became an ethical subject is also important, as it proves the potential of the symptom to be used for identifying a physical body charged with social and cultural meaning. Thus, *The Symptom and the Subject* is a very important contribution to studies on the body, the soul, and the self in ancient Greece.

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[1] Bruno Snell advanced the theory that Homer has no unified concept of man's mental identity. He also suggested that the Homeric body is similarly, only a collection of parts. See Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind: Greek Origins of European Thought*, translated by T.G. Rosenmayer, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953). Michael Clarke argues that it is not this simple. Rather, "the stuff of thought and emotion is one with the stuff of the physical body." He also notes that Homeric language recognizes nothing that can be called the

body which is flesh and blood as opposed to mind or spirit. See Michael Clarke, *Flesh and Spirit in the Songs of Homer: A Study of Words and Myths*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999) 126.

[2] See Michael Clarke, Guillemette Bolens, *La Logique du Corps Articulaire: Les Articulations du corps humain dans la littérature occidentale*, (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2000), Thomas Jahn, *Zum Wortfeld 'Seele-Geist' in der Sprache Homers (Zetemata, 83; Munich) 1987*.



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